

## In The Nation: A Nightmare Debate

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, Sept. 18—Secretary McNamara, in announcing the Administration's decision to build a limited missile defense system, provided an unusual glimpse into the grisly, Strangelovish world of megatonnage and "assured destruction," where it makes no sense to "over-destroy" a target, but where one calculates how many millions of people must be incinerated before the damage becomes "unacceptable" to a society that wants to remain "viable."

All of that, of course, is merely horrible. The nuclear planner's world becomes truly grotesque—a maniacal joke on humanity—only when it is realized that nuclear "capability" is both fearfully destructive and practically impotent.

As McNamara points out, nuclear capability cannot stop subversion in Southeast Asia or force commercial concessions in Africa or keep Latin America subservient to Washington's wishes. Nuclear capability is not like the British Navy in the nineteenth century, or the Marines, or the Green Berets; it has none of the practical possibilities for asserting power or persuading the recalcitrant that all other weapons possess.

Thus, American nuclear ca-

pability, at root, exists to convince Russian nuclear capability that it cannot destroy the United States without causing the Soviet Union to be destroyed, too; and Soviet nuclear capability exists for the reverse reason. To use either for a lesser purpose would be both impractical and dangerous.

This is the macabre proposition that lies at the root of the dangerous and divisive political debate that is sure to follow McNamara's chilling speech. The question at issue will be whether the terrible balance that renders both Soviet and American nuclear power useless for anything but mutual destruction is slowly being disrupted so that nuclear warfare, however infernal, might become a practical proposition for the Soviet Union.

Already, influential members of Congress—backed by some powerful military voices—are saying that the limited missile defense system to be erected against possible Chinese attack should be expanded into a massive system capable of defending against a Soviet attack. McNamara argued vigorously against this proposition with the nightmare logic that makes the nuclear planner's world so incredible and so blood-curd-

Building a defense against Soviet attack, he said, would cause the Soviets vastly to increase their offensive capability. At the same time they would surely deploy their own defensive system to match ours, so that the United States would have to improve the American offensive ability. In the end, both sides would have spent billions; neither would have achieved additional security; and the arms race would have spiraled a notch higher toward that point where the ultimate confrontation might become inevitable.

The counter-arguments are that the Soviet Union will not in the long run have the technical and industrial capacity to maintain such a nuclear race with the United States; but that if Moscow deploys a missile defense first, the Soviets may come to believe that the American nuclear capability is no longer effective, and that they can launch a nuclear war without being themselves destroyed. There are also those who believe that the Soviets already may have made significant gains in defensive technology, which the United States will have to match.

At a less rarefied level of argument, there is not much doubt that if the Soviets do

proceed with a missile defense, any American administration is likely to come under tremendous political pressure to match it, on the grounds that the security of the American people is at stake.

Thus, in announcing plans to build the limited defense system, the Administration took several calculated risks. One was that the announcement would end any chance of negotiations with the Soviets on nuclear arms limitations—although McNamara himself believes the limited nature of the Administration plan will, instead, encourage the Soviets to take part in such talks.

Another was that taking the little step will produce irresistible political pressure for taking a large step that McNamara plainly labeled dangerous and foolish, since he believes it would set both Washington and Moscow off on another form of nuclear arms race.

Finally, if the Soviets believe the limited defense system is only a first step in a larger system erected against their nuclear power, they might move ahead with their own defenses. That would leave McNamara and the Administration no choice but to enter the "foolish and reckless" competition they hope to avoid.